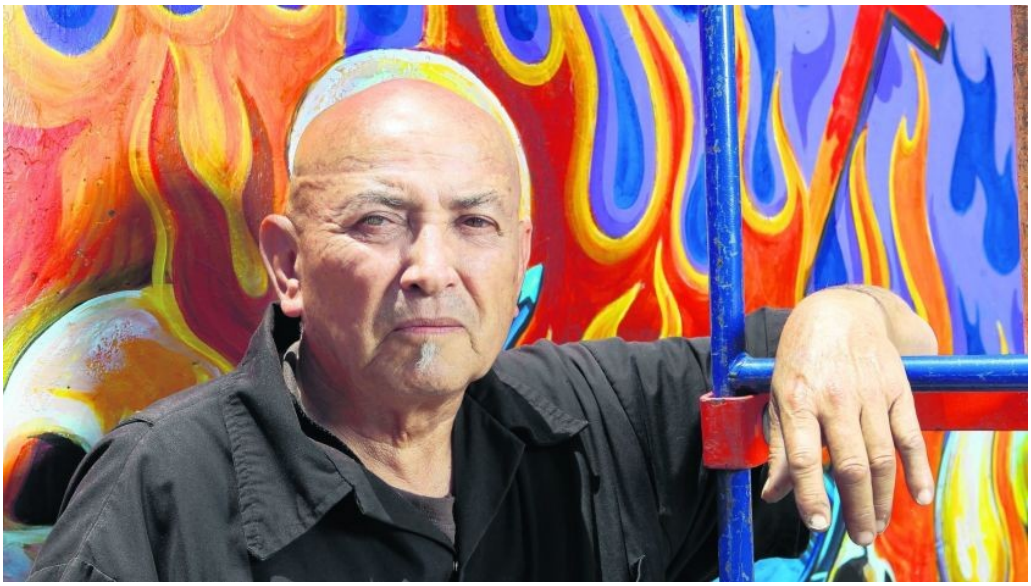
Muralist celebrates the legacy of San Diego's Chicano Park



Guillermo Aranda is one of the original muralists who worked on the Chicano Park murals in the 1970s. (John Gibbins)

By Roxana Popescu April 20, 2017 San Diego Tribune

Guillermo Aranda's understanding of art completely changed after he learned to paint murals. Before that, painting was what you hung in your room or office, he had thought. Suddenly: "I remember driving and looking at the walls and thinking, 'Oh, what a beautiful wall,' " Aranda said. Potential was everywhere. Aranda, 72, ended up working on multiple murals in Chicano Park, which is celebrating its 47th anniversary Saturday. Eventually Aranda became a professional muralist and art teacher. This past January, Chicano Park was designated as a National Historic Landmark.

The artist responsible for the change in Aranda's perspective — and, indirectly, influencing Chicano Park's artworks — was Gilberto Ramirez, a muralist from Mexico City who had studied the art form with one of the country's great muralists, David Alfaro Siqueiros. Ramirez had heard about San Diego's college students' activism focused on Chicano and Mexican identity issues, so he traveled to San Diego "intent on giving them a public and permanent way to express themselves artistically," said Seth Mallios, an anthropology professor at San Diego State University. He taught students including Aranda, who then disseminated mural art at Chicano Park, and later across California.

"I believe there is a direct and powerful link between Mexico City murals and the artwork in Chicano Park," Mallios said, adding that this link and the broader context around the murals' creation are both significant. "The Chicano Park murals drew on many powerful themes of Mexican nationalism, revolutionary struggles, bi-cultural duality, and cultural heroes and heroines," Mallios wrote in an email. "The act of seizing the tract of land from the California Highway Patrol for a public park (as had been promised by the city of San Diego) was highly political. It was the perfect unison of art and activism. … Simply put, it is a highly meaningful feat to have that kind of lineage."

Pride and pain Chicano Park was born from protest and jubilation. The land that holds the pillars of the San Diego-Coronado Bridge was set to become a CHP station, and residents pushed back. Their neighborhood had been previously divided by Interstate 5 and the bridge, and the station was considered another blow.

A few people decided to paint murals, and when permission from Caltrans didn't come fast enough, they proceeded on their own, Aranda said. The group swelled to 150 or 200 painters on the first day. Aranda was one of several core muralists who organized the project and returned week after week to add shading, contours and detail work. "I don't think we had the thought of creating something historic. Everything we were doing was for that moment," he said in a phone call from his home in Aromas, Calif. "As artists, I think we were looking for walls or space to express ourselves, you know?" He described himself as "young and restless and angry and frustrated." He wanted to blow off steam. "Murals allowed us to do that." What he was angry about: the situation of migrant workers. And he had a sense of malaise at the thought that he was disconnected from his roots.

Learning from a master Ramirez was a quiet, diminutive man, but his work was "by no means" quiet, Aranda said. They met when Aranda was studying at San Diego State. Beyond teaching him and another student, Ruben DeAnda, technique and composition, Ramirez gave Aranda a place in the world. "I felt like I was kept in a vacuum, like a suspended animation, with no awareness of who I was or where I came from, and the art and murals allowed me to find myself," Aranda said.

Ramirez told the students stories about "los tres grandes," the three great muralists of Mexico: Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros. At the time, Aranda didn't know anything about murals or Mexican art history. "He lit a fire in me, so to speak. He opened a whole new world," said Aranda, who will be in town Saturday. Learning about Mexican pyramids, sculpture, pottery and jewelry, he felt "amazed," but also sad that he'd never learned about them until then. His curiosity ignited, Aranda visited Mexico for a month after spending time with Ramirez. "Looking at everything I could find: sculpture, mosaic, especially murals." He returned and painted murals at Centro Cultural de la Raza and around Southern California. A few years later, he painted the Chicano Park murals. "History allows us to see our past, positive or negative," Aranda said. (Now, he teaches others to be proud about their pasts, in school, college and prison art classes.)

Mallios said the influence of Mexico City's mural tradition is obvious in Chicano Park. "Ramirez spent months teaching his San Diego assistants techniques and vision for mural art. This vision is clearly evinced in the spectacular murals that were then produced in Chicano Park during the early 1970s," Mallios wrote.

Legacies Is there a difference between Mexican and Chicano murals? Aranda doesn't think anything fundamental distinguishes them. The only contrast is their specific historic moment, but even their contexts and purposes are similar, he said. The three great Mexican muralists "gave hope for the future," Aranda said. "We were doing the same thing." Mallios also sees a commonality: "I believe Chicano Park's murals have had a major impact on the social and political identities of many San Diegans, just as the original Mexican mural art was an essential part of the Mexican Revolution."
Aranda's niece, Maria-Elena Ugalde, who lives in San Diego, didn't think much of her uncle's art when she was growing up. Now she may be his greatest fan. "This connection, I think, is incredible for our family history and our legacy," she said.

Chicano Park Day

What: Themed "Ramón Chunky Sánchez: El Corazón del Pueblo," the day's festivities will include music, dance, speakers and other activities.
When: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday, April 22
Where: Chicano Park (located in the Logan Heights community, south of downtown San Diego under the San Diego-Coronado Bridge)
Admission: Free
Online: chicano-park.com
Popescu is a freelance writer.